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# **Recipe or Performing Art? Challenging conventions for writing action research theses**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the tensions and incongruities between conventional thesis presentation and the principles of action research. Through the experiences of the authors alternative approaches to thesis structure are proposed which are argued to be more congruent with the epistemological, methodological and ethical aspects of action research. Consistent with our arguments, the paper is presented as a play. Act I considers the tensions facing research students wishing to write up their action research in the context of conventional thesis writing requirements; Act II consists of four ‘scenes’ each of which illustrates a key learning arising from our own stories—writing in the self, staying true to the unfolding research story, using metaphor and finally weaving literature throughout the thesis. Act III considers the challenges of examination in the face of breaking with tradition. We conclude with a ‘curtain call’ from the narrator that offers a reflexive engagement with the main themes of the paper.

## **Contribution to the Aim of Action Research**

This paper is relevant to *Action Research* readers who are either involved in supervising action research theses or are writing up their own action research, especially postgraduate research students. It has cross-discipline and international relevance. It is directly relevant to the journal aim in that it offers viable alternatives to dominant modes of thesis presentation. It also offers a creative exposition, beyond conventional journal writing formats.

## **Introduction**

As action research and practitioner-based inquiry is increasingly adopted as a basis of doctoral study, issues arise for students, supervisors and examiners alike as to what it means to produce and judge an action research thesis in relation to traditional thesis presentation criteria (Winter, Griffiths & Green, 2000). Indeed, the question of what constitutes 'quality' action research has resulted in important paradigmatic debates across the humanities and social science disciplines, debates that problematise the nature of 'knowledge' and question the need for uniform criteria of validity (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Winter, Griffiths & Green, 2000). Furthermore, 'one of the great problems with all qualitative research is the constant need to seek its justification within someone else's language game and in relation to someone else's definition of suitable criteria' (Green, cited in Winter, Griffiths & Green, 2000, p. 30).

The quality of PhD or Masters level research is ultimately judged by the dissertation or thesis; the primary mode of exposition, even in the creative arts. It is this writing task that is our focus in this paper. Most research candidates seek advice in relation to this task, to ensure they are meeting the all-important examination requirements. Traditional approaches to structuring theses, especially in the sciences and social sciences, have resulted in the familiar 'five-chapter model', comprising introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis and conclusions. To borrow Bob Dick's (2002) terminology, this is writing by 'recipe' and, as a rule, supervisors will be anxious to ensure their students are following accepted approaches to reduce the risk of alienating examiners. But what of the student who has undertaken action research? Do these conventions apply? Can their less conventional research process be made to 'fit' the five-chapter recipe and still be true to its practice? Do they take an unacceptable risk by straying outside the mainstream? Or can they write their thesis more in keeping with the 'performing art' that is action research (Dick, 2002)?

In this paper we contemplate these questions through the stories of our own experiences as doctoral action researchers. We present some insights which may be of interest to other students undertaking action research and considering challenging the conventions of the academy. As academics now supervising students undertaking

action research and remaining committed to improving our own and our students' research and writing practice, we propose that these insights might also contribute to the ongoing debate about the quality, authenticity and integrity of action research.

In keeping with the spirit of viewing research (and in our case, writing) as performing art rather than recipe, we have adopted the metaphor of a play to structure our paper, playing with the notion of presenting research as a form of performance text<sup>1</sup>. We see our approach in this paper as an example of 'presentational knowing' (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001), which, while rarely seen in academic journal writing, allows the text to 'speak out' and challenge convention. A good performance text 'must be more than cathartic, it must be political, moving people to action and reflection' (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). It is our hope that our 'performance' produces this effect through a deeper and more active reflective engagement with our audience than a more conventional exposition may offer.

## A TALE OF TWO THESES

### (A play in three acts)

#### *Prologue: In Which the Audience is Revealed and We Meet the Main Characters*

*A single spotlight shines on the middle of the closed curtain as the narrator, a figure in top hat and tails, emerges onto the stage.*

**NARRATOR:** Ladies and gentlemen, we invite you to take your seats as we prepare to take you on a journey of intrigue and adventure – some might even say foolishness! Let me assure you, this is not a voyage for the fainthearted. Before we get underway, though, how many of you here tonight are research candidates? ... Wonderful! We think there might be some important lessons for you here, if not cautionary tales. What about students doing action research? ... Excellent! You may find that some of the dilemmas you are facing in the writing of your thesis will be echoed in the stories you hear tonight. Any supervisors in the audience? ... Aha! If you have been challenged to consider how your students might best structure their action research theses, then this play may provide some inspiration and, perhaps, reassurance.

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<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to the reviewers of our original submission who inspired us to 'walk our talk' and produce a more creative exposition of our ideas. We also acknowledge and appreciate the editors of *Action Research* who are prepared to support innovative writing and thus fly in the face of convention themselves.

Now, I'm wondering if there mightn't be an examiner or two out there as well? ... It's great to see you here! Action research candidates will no doubt be pleased to know that you are interested in being challenged regarding the conventions of thesis presentation. Finally, there might be some action research practitioners out there who are reporting on their research outside the formal academic examination process... would you raise your hands? Ah, good. You are most welcome. While this play is more about writing theses than research reports, I'm sure you will find relevance to your own writing context.

Some of you will be fortunate enough to be studying and researching from innovative academic faculties with strong traditions of participatory inquiry and action research. Such places may well already promote creativity and breaking with convention in theses presentation. For you, some of the messages in this play may not be all that new, however, we are glad to have you here with us, and we welcome your participation. I suspect, however, that a good proportion of you will be from contexts where action research is little understood or reluctantly tolerated. We hope our play will offer some alternative strategies as you embark on the significant undertaking of writing your thesis.

In this play we will not be reiterating the foundational tenets of action research, as we are assuming that you have come here tonight with some background already in this area. In any case, action research is discussed extensively in various seminal and current works (for instance, Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart & Zuber-Skerritt, 1991; Carr & Kemmis, 1990; Grundy, 1982; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Passfield, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Wadsworth, 1998; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). In producing this play we do acknowledge that there are a range of approaches to action research, from the more technical focus on organisational or educational change (where the researcher is 'expert') to emancipatory and participatory processes that aim to engender radical social change, and where all participants are equal as co-researchers. The characters who will be performing here for you tonight each have their own understanding of action research practice and appreciate that there is no one 'correct way' to do action research.

The time has now come to introduce the characters and allow them to speak for themselves. The two protagonists in this play are researchers who found that conventional social science thesis presentation constrained the way they wanted to present the complex and non-linear nature of their research. Our protagonists, MCR and CRK<sup>2</sup>, are both higher education teachers who conducted their (quite different) research projects in the course of their professional work. They will now introduce themselves, describing their research projects and their values and perspectives on action research. Our first is Dr MCR, currently a teacher of learning technologies to pre-service teachers:

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<sup>2</sup> MCR stands for 'Meta Cognitive Renata' and CRK is 'Critical Reflection Kath'. The names represent our key theoretical interests (and who we were) at the time we were writing up our PhD dissertations.

**MCR:** Thank you and good evening to you all. My thesis is the story of an action research initiative underpinned by my strong belief in the importance of approaches to computer education which foster lifelong computer learning. In my thesis I trace the journey of a reflexive process of change and iterative development in the teaching of an information computer technology (ICT) unit to pre-service teacher education students. Over a period of three years I pursued a central research question, namely: ‘How can I develop my teaching practice to better facilitate the development of capable computer users?’ My research explored the distinction between a ‘competent’ and a ‘capable’ computer user and trialed a range of teaching and learning approaches to facilitate the development of capable computer users (Phelps, 2002; Phelps & Ellis, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). From the research I developed a metacognitive approach to computer education; an approach which is founded on the premise that adoption of ICT is influenced by an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, motivation, confidence and learning strategies and which promotes learners’ active engagement in directing the learning process.

In my approach to action research, I concur with Bob Dick (2002) who refers to action research as ‘meta-methodology’. Like Lau (1999, p.2), I equate doing action research with a ‘commitment to an underlying philosophy of social science’ and deeply relate to the view of action research as a ‘living practice’ (Carson, 1997). While my research certainly represented a process of critiquing, informing and developing my own teaching practice (the ‘first person’ focus<sup>3</sup>), it also represented a significant opportunity for students to self-examine and redefine their relationships with technology (the ‘second person’ focus). A ‘third person’ focus inevitably emerged as we collectively challenged the traditions of directive-style computer training, and ultimately provided a more complex understanding of the computer-learning context.

While my unconventional writing approach was somewhat challenging to my supervisors, they were willing to support it given my fairly persuasive justification of the approach in the introduction to my thesis.

**NARRATOR:** Our second main character is Dr CRK, who currently supervises and mentors postgraduate students within the same institution as MCR.

**CRK:** Thank you—and great to see such an enthusiastic audience here tonight. My PhD explored how economics could be taught within an emancipatory framework to students in two different institutions—those studying welfare at TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and those undertaking social science at university. The TAFE students became collaborators with me (the ‘second person’ focus of the research) in developing an empowering curriculum that demystified conventional economics and introduced students to a range of

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<sup>3</sup> In response to a request from a reviewer of our original submission, we have introduced our individual projects through the lens of ‘first, second and third person’ research practice as articulated by Bradbury and Reason (2001, p. 449). First person research suggests the impact of the research on the researcher herself (the ‘I’); reflections on practice as well as inner changes that occur through reflection and action. Second person research is how the participants/partners in the research (the ‘you’) are influenced and changed through the process. Finally, third person research encompasses the implications of the research for broader world beyond the immediate locus of action (the ‘they’).

alternative economic theories. The process of critical reflection emerged as a key research interest for me, which I explored in detail with the university students who were encouraged to reflect critically on how economics impacted on their lives as well as on the wider society and ecological systems (the 'third person' focus). One of the outcomes of my personal reflection was to critically examine the role of activism in the face of globalisation and how I personally constructed my own activism (my 'first person' work), drawing on critiques of critical social science put forward by postmodern writers (Fisher, 2000, 2003a, 2003b).

My philosophy in relation to action research is located in the emancipatory and critical tradition. In my view, critical action research involves a commitment to political action. I concur with Kemmis (Kemmis, 1996; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) that a criterion of 'success' of an action research process is the politicisation of the participants. Thus I perceive the role of the action researcher as an activist who must be critically reflective of her own activist position, being careful not to impose her own 'liberatory' agenda (Lather, 1991) on those with whom she researches and works.

I undertook my research in a university department which supported the paradigm of 'action inquiry', exemplified in the work of Reason (1988), Reason & Bradbury (2001) and Torbert (1991). My supervisor supported unconventional thesis presentation, particularly emphasising the importance of the subjective presence of the researcher.

*The characters and the narrator leave the stage.*

- Curtain -

## ACT I

### ***In Which the Narrator and Protagonists Set the Scene and Describe the 'Existential Choices' Faced by Action Research Candidates***

*As the curtain rises, the audience sees a set on two levels. Towering over the stage, but in the background, is a series of five large symmetrical grey blocks lined up in a row. In the foreground, and at stage level, is a colourful montage of moving and interacting spirals. The narrator walks on, gazing up at the towers and moving in and out of the spirals. MCR and CRK follow, taking up their positions on the opposite side of the stage.*

NARRATOR: This is a play about challenging orthodoxy; in particular the orthodoxy of writing up research. Many of you will have consulted, at some stage, the wealth of literature available for research students on how to write a thesis (for example, Rudestam & Newton, 1992; Van Wagenen, 1991). Such 'self-help' manuals generally offer what has come to be an accepted approach to writing a thesis; the standard, formulaic 'five-chapter' structure – introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis of data, and conclusions and implementations, followed by the bibliography and appendices. While this model undoubtedly provides a valuable resource for postgraduate students



learning the research writing process, it tends to be considered by novice researchers as the *only* approach to thesis writing.

But what if the straight-edged, linear blocks of orthodoxy restrict and impair the authenticity and integrity of a research process that is dynamic, non-linear and emergent? How does the PhD student doing action research proceed? Although alternative approaches have been considered by some researchers (for example, Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004) candidates submitting the culmination of several years' research for examination by an unknown academic, often consider it 'safer' to follow established convention. Supervisors, who are likely to have structured their own theses in the conventional way, may feel hesitant in recommending or supporting alternative approaches. Indeed, some action research candidates have run foul of the examination process (Hughes, Denley & Whitehead, 1998), and one of our main characters, CRK, had a challenging experience of examination in this regard, as we shall see in Act III. Our focus tonight is to present the story of how our two researchers tackled the challenge of presenting action-based research in the context of a still-conservative academy.

**MCR:** When I was seeking guidance in structuring my PhD, I found little had been written on how to present action research theses. Those papers that did consider it tended to argue that action research be treated like any other methodology and accommodated within conventional structures and university presentation guidelines (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002). Perry (1994) for instance, noted that sticking with the five-chapter model can allay concerns regarding the 'messy' and 'inconclusive' impression provided by action research and he recommended including reflections on the action research study in the body and restricting discussion of practical and experiential aspects of the research to appendices.

Within my institution action research had a strong profile, however the conventional thesis structure had been widely adopted by action researchers and adherence to convention seemed to be preferred by my own and other action research candidates' supervisors.

**CRK:** That could be because much action research within our institution was predominantly focused on organisational change, and was technical rather than emancipatory.

**MCR:** You could be right CRK. I did find some papers presenting an alternative perspective. Bob Dick (1993; 2000; 2002), for instance, notes that universities often structure higher degrees on the assumption that 'good' research is 'theory-driven' rather than 'data-driven'. Acknowledging that some examiners 'may be surprised by data-driven research because it does not fit their notion of legitimate higher degree research' (Dick, 2002, p.160), he provides justification and motivation for action researchers to be creative, arguing that conventional thesis structures do not do justice to action research. Bob's articulation of the 'existential choice' that needs to be made by research candidates left a particularly strong impression on me:

*Do you want to be an apprentice who will learn thoroughly, from your supervisor, committee and literature, a particular approach to research? That is, will your learning be primarily propositional? At the conclusion of such a research program you can expect to know how to do one form of research. To overstate the situation, this is research by recipe. Or do you expect to engage in research with whatever resources and understandings you can bring to bear, learning from your experiences? That is, will your learning be primarily through questioning inquiry, with supervisor and committee functioning as mentors rather than as teachers? Such an approach will engage you in examining your assumptions about the nature of knowledge and of methodologies. This is research as performing art (pp. 161-162).*

**CRK:** This is certainly a pertinent quote for our purposes, but I wouldn't want to give the impression that research or even thesis writing falls neatly into one of these two categories. The 'academic norm' for research reports is only one possible format and conventions and expectations regarding writing structure have been, and are, continually changing (Winter, 1989). Since action research emerges from a different context and different relationships (collaborative and action-oriented rather than authoritative and observation-oriented), Winter argues that there is good cause for reports of action research also to be different. He proposes two specific variations: a 'case study' of the process of the work, in narrative form; and a 'plural text' where the voice of a single author is partially replaced by an interplay between the voices of participants in the research. Winter goes further by stating that some stylistic features of academic writing can be seen to be 'inappropriate' for action research, particularly where style, tone and vocabulary express an 'expert' role or a withdrawal from personal involvement or sustained abstraction from concrete detail.

**MCR:** Like Winter (1989) I would argue that the ideological aspects of action research cannot be separated from the perceived 'necessities' of thesis structure and presentation. To do so would undermine the very foundations of action research and hence the integrity of the thesis which depicts and conveys the research. If action research is truly seen by the researcher as a 'living practice' (Carson, 1997) then the life and practice of the research cannot, and should not, simply be 'appendicised'.

**NARRATOR:** This sets the scene for our play. Let's watch while our protagonists tell their stories of how they attempted to write their theses more in keeping with the moving montage of cycles and spirals than the fixed and immovable blocks of convention.

- Curtain -

## Act II

### Scene 1: *In Which the Writer/Researcher Takes Centre Stage*

*The curtain rises to the same backdrop as in Act I, but in the front of the stage MCR and CRK, dressed in plain black, are seated on a comfortable garden seat that overlooks a pond reflecting the surrounding trees and sky. The narrator stands to one side of the stage, in front of the curtain.*

**CRK:** One of the conventions of academic thesis writing that has come under sustained challenge from a number of disciplines is the use of the third person, often in passive voice, that renders the researcher invisible, giving the impression of an ‘objective’, dispassionate stance. The use of a first person active voice in research presentation is now supported by ample precedent and theoretical debate (Onn, 1998), and the contribution of postpositivist and poststructuralist analysis, particularly feminist epistemology, has meant that the ‘objective’ researcher has been revealed to be a myth (Alcott & Potter, 1993; Guba, 1990; Lather, 1991; Reason, 1988; Schwandt, 1990).

In action research the researcher is also ‘the researched’ (Wadsworth, 1998). This requires the researcher to account for the way in which the research both shapes and is shaped by them, not just because they conduct it, but because they *are* it (Sumara & Carson, 1997). Epistemologically it is simply not consistent to write a text which does not bear the traces of its author (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). How did you confront this challenge, MCR?

**MCR:** I found it quite artificial to separate my voice as writer and researcher from the action research process and the findings. The centrality of reflection itself made this separation impossible. While some action researchers revert to the use of third person in some chapters, such as the introduction or conclusions, I maintained first-person throughout. I’ll read from my thesis conclusion to illustrate:

*For me, as teacher, the research has evoked significant growth. Aside from the tangible changes in teaching approach... a number of more subtle changes have occurred. The research has necessitated my conscious ‘letting go’ of teacher control and centrality in the learning process... to step back and recognise the importance of explicitly acknowledging the breadth of authentic support structures which are important for lifelong and non-institutionally-based learning and fostering students’ help-seeking strategies.*

**CRK:** I also made my presence as researcher explicit from the outset of my thesis. As action research (and, indeed, any research) is inevitably formed and influenced by the researcher’s values, attitudes and beliefs, I saw it as important to articulate these. After all, situations do not just happen, they are historically and temporally directed by the intentionality of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p.417). In the second chapter of my thesis, titled ‘*Positioning*

*the researcher: the constructing of an activist identity*', I made my subjective position explicit and articulated the influences that led to my chosen research:

*Embarking on research within the paradigm of humanistic inquiry in which social ecology is embedded meant that from the outset I was required to reflect on personal sources of my passion for my chosen research area. This process itself was revealing as it allowed me to take a particular perspective on my life and identify a 'path' that had led me to my (activist) interest in demystifying economics and making a difference in the world ...This chapter tracks the sources of my framing of such an activist intention, identifying major family and cultural influences as well as the influence of discourses of adult education, co-counselling, living on an intentional community and Heart Politics.*

Such exploration would seem to be an essential aspect of reflexivity (Gergen & Gergen, 2000), as the researcher/writer exposes their own historical and geographical situation, their personal investment in the research and the biases they bring to the project.

**MCR:** Yes, and I'm sure you'd agree that action research theses can successfully draw on the research traditions of personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and self-research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), within which subjectivity is 'the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected' (Peshkin, 1988, p.18). In fact, personal narrative can enhance the relevance and impact of the research, allowing readers 'to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points... and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

**CRK:** This idea of using reflexivity within personal narrative is illustrated in this excerpt from the second chapter from my thesis:

*When I reflect on that time in my life [dropping out of a prestigious coursework Masters of Economics at the age of 24], it is clear to me now that I was subjected first-hand to the very same alienating experience of that dehumanised, mechanistic, value-absent ideology that has provided the core motivation for this thesis. Despite my inexperience, my lack of training in critical analysis, my devotion to fulfilling my father's (and others') expectations, I wonder if at some level I recognised that there was something seriously wrong with a social science that seemed so devoid of humanity, spirit, ethics and justice.*

**MCR:** I too defined my position as both researcher and teacher up front in my introduction, and made my values and beliefs very explicit. This helped set the tone of reflexivity throughout my thesis:

*In my approach to both my research and my teaching I firmly identify as a constructivist. I believe that we can only 'know' through interaction with the world...I have a strong passion for learning and change. I tend to challenge existing practices and to strive constantly towards improvement... I view our social existence in the world as highly complex and... challenge the capacity of traditional research to adequately address many social problems.*

I also structured reflexivity into my thesis through the device of a brief section at the end of each chapter titled '*Stepping Back and Looking Forward*' which enabled me to reflect on the chapter and outline how this drove the research forward into the following research cycle.

**CRK:** I presented my iterative reflexive process through the use of different 'voices', similar to Winter's (1989) concept of the 'plural text', as explained in the following extract from chapter 6:

*The three voices are: first, a relatively 'neutral' reporting voice that relays the 'facts' of what happened; second, the 'reflective practitioner', the voice I used in conversation with the students demonstrating my reflective practice at the time, informed by the requirements of critical action research and supported by a critical community of peers; and the third voice, the 'critical reflector', offers a 'commentary' on the sometimes naïve voice of the reflective practitioner from a vantage point that names the assumptions made and reflects on some of the silences and absences in the narrative.*

**NARRATOR:** This connection between reflexivity and narrative leads us into the next scene, which highlights the importance of representing the unfolding research story within the writing process.

- Curtain -

## **Scene 2: *In Which the Thesis Stays True to the Narrative***

*The curtain rises. The backdrop of grey blocks and garden seat remain, but the reflective pond has been replaced by a semi-circle of listeners seated on the ground at the feet of the characters.*

**NARRATOR:** All research is a form of story telling (House, 1994), although traditionally researchers shy away from using the term ‘story’ given its connotations of unreliability or lack of rigour. Let us see what our protagonists have to say on this subject.

**CRK:** I would argue that there is no more appropriate approach to understanding action research than to see it as an unfolding narrative. An action research endeavour *is* the story of individual and/or group change: change in practices, beliefs and assumptions. Personal narrative, and the notion of research as story repositions the reader as an active and vicarious co-participant in the research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

**MCR:** Yes, I agree. Winter et al. (2000, p. 36) has, in fact, stated that one of the important criteria for a ‘quality’ PhD is to ‘tell a compelling story’.

**CRK:** I would suggest that documenting the cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting should be done iteratively since each cycle of the research is only understandable in terms of the systematic and self-critical learning gained through previous cycles.

**MCR:** Wanting to remain true to the story of my research, I presented the chapters of my thesis in the same chronological order as the research itself. I did not have separate chapters covering the literature review, the methodology or the data analysis. Instead I allowed the research process to unfold for the reader, reinforcing the notion of research as personal, professional, methodological and theoretical ‘journey’. What was your experience, CRK?

**CRK:** I also utilised a chronological format, finding that without staying true to the changes that I experienced during the research process, I could not demonstrate the emergent nature of that process that cycle after cycle of reflection produced. I reflected at the conclusion of my thesis:

*The very nature of action research is an unfolding and emergent process, inevitably because of the reflection that is embedded within it. The thesis is therefore framed in a way that mirrors the unfolding research journey... Reflection has permeated every stage and has emerged as a primary focus of the research itself. It seems to me that action research itself invites this—what emerges is what needs to be researched. In a way, this reflects a direct antidote to positivism and its ontology of prediction and control. Engaging the spirit of action research almost demands a letting go of having things go a particular way.*

**MCR:** I believe that this narrative approach also supports validity since it consciously works against camouflaging or failing to acknowledge pragmatic realities, iterative learning and the inevitable weaknesses that frequently remain unacknowledged in traditional research presentation. In my research I explicitly acknowledged that action research represents a journey down many roads, some of which inevitably prove to be dead ends. Sometimes these

mistaken paths have been taken for justifiable reasons, while others may be traversed through simple error or mistaken assumptions and beliefs.

**CRK:** I agree. In conventional research there is a culture of leaving these dead ends unacknowledged—we don't hear about the mistakes that often lead to significant rethinking or insight. In action research, however, these apparent 'dead ends' are a critical part of the learning, change and theory development process. As highlighted in Scene 1, reflexivity permits us to reveal such weaknesses or 'untruths' and requires us to 'own up' to our responsibility in the knowledge construction process (Hall, 1996). Mellor (2001), for instance, refers to his 'messy project' as an 'honesty trail'.

**MCR:** So for us, a chronological approach to thesis presentation supports the researcher's acknowledgment of this iterative and unfolding learning process and represents a more rigorous and truthful presentation of the research process.

**NARRATOR:** This reference to research as a journey is an example of how metaphor can be used productively and imaginatively to enhance understanding. This leads us nicely into the next scene.

- Curtain -

### **Scene 3: *In Which Metaphor Costumes the Thesis***

*The scene is identical, but the characters have changed from their plain clothes into the costumes of travellers, complete with suitcases, cameras, binoculars, maps, guidebooks, hats and walking boots.*

**NARRATOR:** As Mason Cooley once said 'Clothes make a statement. Costumes tell a story' (Cooley, 1993). The use of metaphors in a thesis is like the wearing of costumes in a play—they bring meaning to the story, meaning that is generated through the image with more efficiency than the literal relaying of information.

**CRK:** Various writers have explored the use of metaphor and its integral role in the generation of meaning and the construction of social and political reality (for instance, Hovelynck, 1998; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ortony, 1979; Taylor, 1984). In fact, metaphors are among our principal vehicles for understanding, permeating communication and perception at individual, cultural and societal levels (Mignot, 2000). Yet metaphor is often perceived as 'unscientific, untrustworthy, a linguistic embellishment' (Mignot, 2000, p.518), arguments which Lakoff (1980) refers to as the 'myths of objectivism and subjectivism'. Metaphor can provide not only a richer description of research as experienced by the researcher(s) but also allows a deeper exploration of the meanings generated by collaborating participants. You used metaphor to good effect in your thesis, MCR.

**MCR:** Yes, I found that metaphor provided a powerful vehicle for portraying the ‘journey’, the ‘adventure’, the ‘saga’ that was my action research process. For me the cycles of personal engagement over time represented a personal and professional pilgrimage through both familiar and unfamiliar terrain. The title of my thesis, *Mapping the Complexity of Computer Learning: Journeying beyond Teaching for Computer Competency to Facilitating Computer Capability* established the metaphor from the beginning. I also used my chapter headings to demonstrate the unfolding research journey:

- *Charting the Context of Research and Practice (chapter 1);*
- *Journey Origins and Point of Departure (chapter 2);*
- *Embracing Reflection as Navigation: Postcards from Cycle 1 (chapter 3);*
- *Encountering a Theoretical Bridge: Crossing to a Metacognitive Approach (chapter 4);*
- *Integrating Metacognition: Planning for Cycle 2 (chapter 5);*
- *The Journey Continues: Postcards from Cycle 2 (chapter 6);*
- *Encountering Turbulence: Postcards from Cycle 3 (chapter 7);*
- *Complexity as Window on the Research (chapter 8); and*
- *Journey Ending as Journey Beginning (chapter 9).*

I continued to use the journeying metaphor as part of my reflexivity, exemplified by the following extract from my final chapter:

*My research has involved me challenging my expectations and re-designing the maps which I brought to my initially envisaged itinerary. My thesis charts my ‘discoveries’ and individual and cultural encounters. It provides a ‘diary’ of my changes in direction and the influence of my travels on my own assumptions.*

**CRK:** While I described my research as a journey I did not use metaphor explicitly to frame my thesis structure. I wish I had! I wonder if, for many academics, constructing research as ‘journey’ would be considered unacceptable, since the thesis is generally perceived primarily as an ‘argument’?

**MCR:** This is likely to be the case for many supervisors. However, I believe such a perception is inconsistent with the epistemic foundations of action research. Action research is *not* about testing preconceived hypotheses or generalising about research ‘findings’. It is about depicting the context, change processes, resultant learning and theorising of individuals or groups in a process of mutual change and inquiry. Metaphor is like a costume—it enhances meaning through imagery and colour. The author (actor) can dress her argument in a way that indicates the meaning of the process to her. Using the play metaphor has clothed this otherwise conventional journal paper in a way that (we hope) brings the arguments we are making alive to our imagined audience.



**NARRATOR:** Let's move now to the final scene of this act, a scene in which our protagonists make a case for presenting the literature throughout the thesis, rather than in the single 'literature review' chapter, as demanded by the conventional five chapter structure.

- Curtain -

#### **Scene 4: *In Which Literature is Woven Throughout the Thesis***

*The curtain rises to a scene of movement. The hitherto passive listeners, who have been seated at the feet of the storytellers, join together with MCR and CRK in a process of dismantling the five large blocks (which are now revealed to be made up of smaller blocks), taking the ribbons that make up the spirals and interweaving them among the blocks to produce an impression of flow and harmony.*

**CRK:** Taking a chronological or narrative approach to thesis writing has implications for the presentation of literature and theory. In conventional research the literature review aims to build a theoretical foundation upon which issues are identified as worth researching (Perry, 1994). However, in action research the issues pursued are those which arise from a cluster of problems of mutual concern and consequence to the researcher(s) and collaborators (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

**MCR:** This means that in an action research thesis, the explanation of the origin of the research and the justification for its need lie not in the literature but in the personal narrative of the participant researchers. Literature is more important in shaping the ongoing *development* of action research (Green, 1999) than informing its initial foundation or relating its findings to other research.

**CRK:** In conventional thesis formats, the literature review is presented up front in its entirety, implying that all the literature was familiar to the researcher at the beginning of the research. This is usually a misrepresentation of the research process. The requirement to present an up-to-date literature review at the time of submission itself necessitates that the review is in constant flux until submission. Moreover, it is not humanly possible to expect that a researcher, no matter how familiar they are with their disciplinary context, will have covered all relevant literature *before* they begin their research.

**MCR:** Action researchers seek theory to partially answer their questions, to challenge their assumptions, to widen their perspectives and to inform their practice. Green (cited in Winter, Griffiths & Green, 2000) argues that relevant literature cannot be 'predetermined' and that quality action research will show how the writer has engaged with the literature and how this has challenged their views. For this reason there is a good case for presenting the literature as part of the cyclical structure of the research and thesis, situating it temporally in the action research cycles themselves. A similar recommendation has been made by Dick (1993; 2000) who recommended that literature be reported adjacent to the relevant findings. In another paper Green (1999) notes the value of sharing

with the reader the excitement experienced by the researcher in encountering new and challenging literature.

**CRK:** It is also relevant to note that literature encountered throughout the research will either support the researcher's current actions or challenge their perspectives, assumptions or approaches. As Brewer and Hunter (1989, p.18) note, 'evidence from two sources is intuitively more persuasive than evidence from one'. If 'evidence' is interpreted as encompassing prior research, then the discovery of research which supports one's own interpretations might be seen as 'triangulating' the data, but only where such research was not known to the researcher beforehand. Thus it can be valuable to explicitly acknowledge any literature that has influenced the research process or its interpretation *as it is encountered* in the process. How did you tackle this issue of literature presentation, MCR?

**MCR:** I consciously presented literature iteratively and chronologically throughout my thesis. For instance, in chapter 4, I describe a transition that occurred in the research, prompted by encountering a body of literature which acted as a new 'road map'. I not only outline this literature at that point in the thesis, but I include reflections on the literature, its relationship to the first cycle and how, as a researcher, I perceived its value in shaping my second cycle. Toward the end of my candidature, I embraced a fresh body of literature, complexity theory (Waldrop, 1992), that assisted me in 'making sense' of my data and experiences. I chose not to present this literature until chapter 8; to do otherwise would have detracted from the integrity of my research presentation, implying a theoretical window on the research I did not hold at the time. How did you justify your literature approach, CRK?

**CRK:** I'll quote from my introduction where I argued for this approach to literature in terms of honouring the unfolding nature of my research:

*The thesis is framed in a way that reflects the emergent process that was produced through conducting action research... Literature is woven through the developing argument, reflecting how my reading informed different stages of the research process... Th[e] unfolding process of research, reflection and insight leading to further research and reflection provides the framework for structuring the thesis.*

**NARRATOR:** Our protagonists have now finished presenting their case for a different sort of thesis presentation consistent with the spirit and epistemology of action research. Please give them a big round of applause as they leave the stage.

In our final act we will hear how their approaches to thesis writing were greeted by their examiners.

- Curtain -

## ACT III

### Enter the critics!

*The curtain rises to darkness. The narrator enters stage left, illuminated by a spotlight.*

**NARRATOR:** One of the objections supervisors are likely to raise against adopting these less conventional approaches to thesis writing is the negative response of examiners, especially those unfamiliar with action research. Let's find out from the examiners of these two theses what their responses were.<sup>4</sup>

Tell me, Dr A, what do you think of the format adopted by MCR?

*Another spotlight lights up Dr A, MCR's first examiner, standing stage right.*

**Dr A:** The candidate makes a persuasive argument for the format of the report and then follows this with a superb demonstration of why her initial decision was appropriate.

**NARRATOR:** And you, Dr B?

*Spotlight on Dr A fades and Dr B is lit by a spotlight centre stage.*

**Dr B:** The metaphor of a journey integrates the parts of the thesis in a complete story. This structure avoids an artificially neat intellectual edifice, which would disguise the messy and brilliant process of research.

**NARRATOR:** Overall, MCR's examiners were well satisfied with her thesis, recommending it for an outstanding thesis award. CRK's thesis, however, received a more mixed reception. Dr C, how did you find the structure of this thesis?

**Dr C:** The thesis had a linear quality to it while capturing the dynamic dialectic of critical reflection... I kept reading to find the research questions, and realized they were truly emergent... the research questions, placed where they were, was like an 'aha experience'.

**NARRATOR:** And you Dr D, how do you respond to its weaving and dynamic quality?

**Dr D:** ...it is striking in the way the thesis exemplifies the critical reflexivity it sets out to explore...It continually weaves together its analytic threads in a most convincing way... [There] is a good, progressive unfolding of the research, first opening up themes and then deepening the analysis.

**NARRATOR:** So now to you, Dr E. I believe you were irritated by the method, interpreting it as sloppy and lacking in rigour.

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<sup>4</sup> Examiners' responses are either taken directly from their reports or paraphrased.

**Dr E:** I found the way was literature treated in the thesis to be most unsatisfactory. For instance, there was no definition or discussion of the nature of ideology until chapter 3, and only a superficial discussion of reflection in that chapter.

**NARRATOR:** And yet, the candidate returned to a more detailed discussion of critical reflection in chapter 8, in keeping with the emergent nature of the research process, which she foreshadowed in her introduction. The candidate responded in her defence that '[Dr E's] reading of ... the whole thesis seemed partial and fragmented rather than integrated and holistic. He did not seem to be aware of the connections that were being made throughout and the way the thesis was crafted as a whole integrated entity'. Now let us take an example where your perceptions were very different from those of Dr D – the use of the different 'voices' in chapter 6 (described in Act II, Scene 1).

**Dr E:** I found this device problematic and thought that the voices were used inconsistently and selectively with no explanation for the choices made.

**Dr D:** I beg to differ, Dr. E. The candidate made her rationale very clear at the beginning of the chapter. I thought her use of this strategy was impressive, very effective and a creative and practical resolution of a key difficulty of practitioner-based research.

*The light fades on all examiners.*

**NARRATOR:** Ultimately CRK was able to mount a successful defence against Dr E's criticisms, using the comments from the other two examiners and the support of her supervisor to substantiate her claims.

Our protagonists would argue that the most effective ways to overcome potential examiner resistance are to make strong justification for the presentation format from the outset *and* to choose examiners sympathetic to action research and unconventional formats. Many examiners *do* appreciate freshness and originality, not only in thought and expression, but also in presentation. While there is always the risk of an unsympathetic examiner, by explicitly structuring the thesis consistent with the epistemological, methodological and ethical aspects of action research, postgraduate students can provide a clear and rigorous justification for their choices.

-Curtain-

### **Curtain call**

*The narrator comes to the front of the stage in front of the curtain to converse with the audience.*

**NARRATOR:** Now that we have come to the end of our performance, it is time to take stock and reflect on what has arisen here tonight, in the spirit of a reflexive engagement with our practice. How might these different writing

approaches contribute to improved action research practice? Our protagonists would suggest that they contribute to greater honesty and authenticity in the research process; honour the reflective and iterative processes at the heart of action research; demonstrate heightened awareness of self for both researcher and collaborators; highlight the importance of contextual influences; and support increased engagement with complexity at personal, inter-personal and global levels. Furthermore, they would argue that encouraging honest reporting of research and the deep reflection it engenders, builds competencies for all those engaging in research.

However, as our play has shown, flying in the face of academic convention is not for the faint-hearted. If you are a PhD student, you may wish to reflect on whether you would consider taking an alternative approach to writing up your research. Is your writing practice consistent with the way your research proceeded? Have you been able to incorporate your own reflective process and that of your collaborators? To what extent has your perspective changed throughout your research process and can you represent that in your writing? How important is it to you to record the research *process* as much as the outcomes or results? How open is your supervisor to a different writing format? Does your research context lend itself to this sort of writing? What would be the main constraints for you in adopting such an approach? How might conforming to convention deaden your creativity? And are the risks worth taking in terms of what you might receive at the hands of power?

Those of you who supervise action research students will be aware of the problems of exposing students' work to unsympathetic examiners. One possible risk is that the thesis becomes too 'wordy', with too much narrative detail at the expense of clarity and strong theoretical argument. Examiners may not appreciate the 'suspense format'; feeling that they are labouring up an incline to reach the punch-line (Brown, 1994) or they may be surprised by the introduction of new ideas late in the thesis. Another risk is that students over-identify with their own stories and indulge in too much 'confessional narrative'. As supervisors you might consider: how can I help my student(s) recognise what is worth reporting in their dissertations? How can I help them distinguish authentic inquiry and understanding from indulgent navel gazing? How can I assist in identifying key turning points in the narrative rather than giving 'blow by blow' descriptions?

*CRK and MCR enter and stand beside the narrator.*

To conclude, we are not suggesting that the approaches outlined here are essential for students writing action research theses. We certainly do not want to give the impression that this presentational form becomes a 'new potential orthodoxy' (to quote one of our reviewers). We would, however, wholeheartedly encourage you as students and supervisors to experiment with any form that seems analogically appropriate to your research material, being always careful to be aware of how the form you use might preclude certain perspectives and how the form itself may constrain your interpretations. For instance, attempting to maintain coherence within a particular chosen metaphor may lead to being too identified with the metaphor itself and prevent

disconfirming 'truths' being voiced. We found this an interesting dilemma in re-presenting our paper as performance. Did we sacrifice too much by being too enamoured with the form in which we presented our arguments? We found ourselves debating and considering the balance required to walk such a tightrope. Ultimately, we leave it to you, our audience, to judge how well we have achieved this balance.

As a parting word, in the true spirit of action research, we would encourage a 'meta-reflection' on the form of presentation as well as the substance of the research itself. Above all, strive to be simultaneously playful and rigorously reflective. Farewell for now, and we hope to meet some of you on your own adventurous journeying.

*All bow. Applause.*

-Curtain-

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